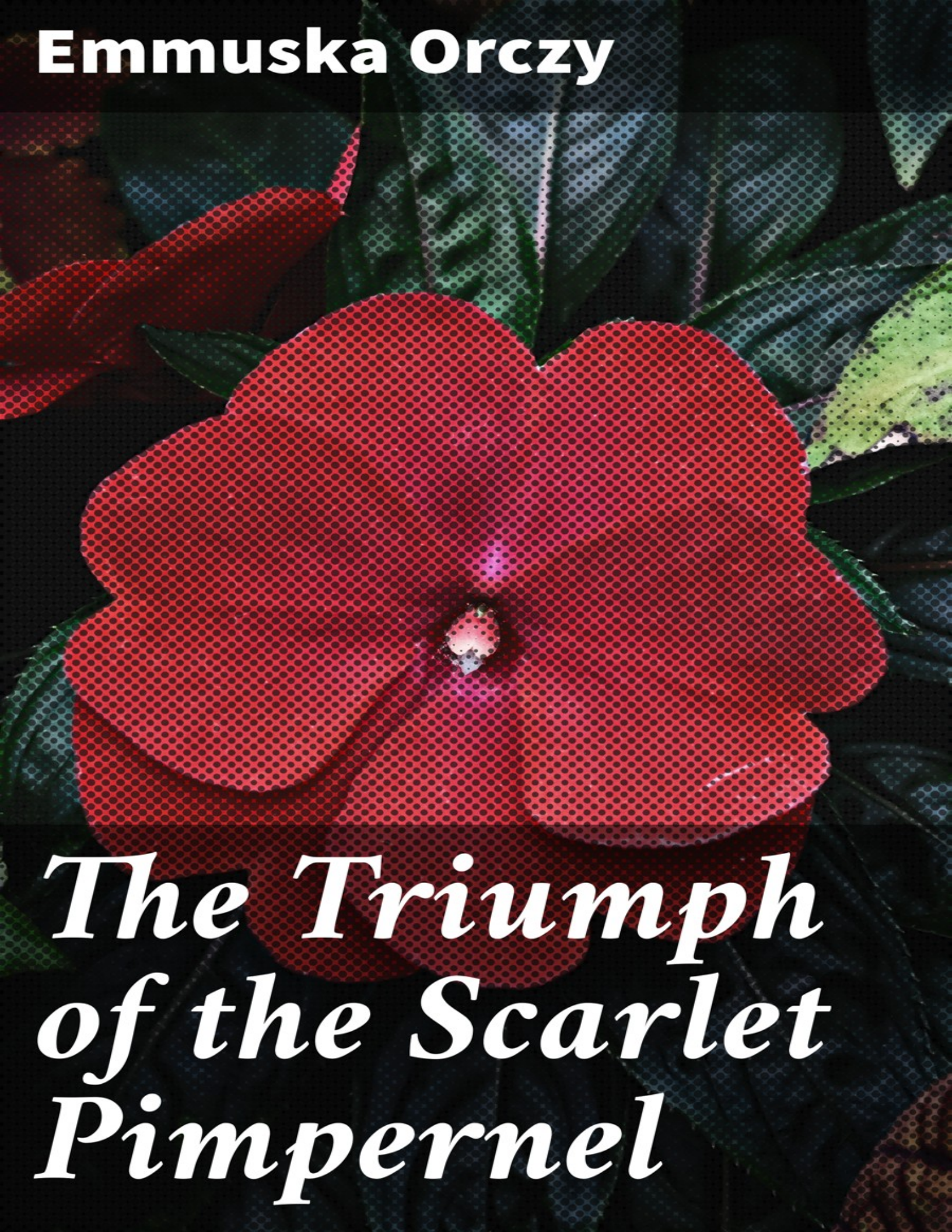
Emmuska Orczy



The Triumph of the Scarlet Pimpernel

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Chapter II—Feet of Clay

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1.

On this 26th day of April, 1794, which in the newly constituted calendar is the 7th Floreal, year II of the Republic, three women and one man were assembled in a small, closely curtained room on the top floor of a house in the Rue de la Planchette, which is situated in a remote and dreary quarter of Paris. The man sat upon a chair which was raised on a dais. He was neatly, indeed immaculately, dressed, in dark cloth coat and tan breeches, with clean linen at throats and wrists, white stockings and buckled shoes. His own hair was concealed under a mouse-coloured wig. He sat quite still, with one leg crossed over the other, and his thin, bony hands were clasped in front of him.

Behind the dais there was a heavy curtain which stretched right across the room, and in front of it, at opposite corners, two young girls, clad in grey, clinging draperies, sat upon their heels, with the palms of their hands resting flat upon their thighs. Their hair hung loose down their backs, their chins were uplifted, their eyes fixed, their bodies rigid in an attitude of contemplation. In the centre of the room a woman stood, gazing upwards at the ceiling, her arms folded across her breast. Her grey hair, lank and unruly, was partially hidden by an ample floating veil of an indefinite shade of grey, and from her meagre shoulders and arms, her garment—it was hardly a gown—descended in straight, heavy, shapeless folds. In front of her was a small table, on it a large crystal globe, which rested

on a stand of black wood, exquisitely carved and inlaid with mother-of-pearl, and beside it a small metal box.

Immediately above the old woman's head an oil lamp, the flame of which was screened by a piece of crimson silk, shed a feeble and lurid light upon the scene. Against the wall half a dozen chairs, on the floor a threadbare carpet, and in one corner a broken-down chiffonier represented the sum total of the furniture in the stuffy little room. The curtains in front of the window, as well as the portières which masked both the doors, were heavy and thick, excluding all light and most of the outside air.

The old woman, with eyes fixed upon the ceiling, spoke in a dull, even monotone.

"Citizen Robespierre, who is the Chosen of the Most High, hath deigned to enter the humble abode of his servant," she said. "What is his pleasure to-day?"

"The shade of Danton pursues me," Robespierre replied, and his voice too sounded toneless, as if muffled by the heavily weighted atmosphere. "Can you not lay him to rest?"

The woman stretched out her arms. The folds of her woollen draperies hung straight from shoulder to wrist down to the ground, so that she looked like a shapeless bodiless, grey ghost in the dim, red light.

"Blood!" she exclaimed in a weird, cadaverous wail. "Blood around thee and blood at thy feet! But not upon thy head, O Chosen of the Almighty! Thy decrees are those of the Most High! Thy hand wields His avenging Sword! I see thee walking upon a sea of blood, yet thy feet are as white as lilies and thy garments are spotless as the driven snow.

Avaunt," she cried in sepulchral tones, "ye spirits of evil! Avaunt, ye vampires and ghouls! and venture not with your noxious breath to disturb the serenity of our Morning Star!"

The girls in front of the dais raised their arms above their heads and echoed the old soothsayer's wails.

"Avaunt!" they cried solemnly. "Avaunt!"

Now from a distant corner of the room, a small figure detached itself out of the murky shadows. It was the figure of a young negro, glad in white from head to foot. In the semi-darkness the draperies which he wore were alone visible, and the whites of his eyes. Thus he seemed to be walking without any feet, to have eyes without any face, and to be carrying a heavy vessel without using any hands. His appearance indeed was so startling and so unearthly that the man upon the dais could not suppress and exclamation of terror. Whereupon a wide row of dazzlingly white teeth showed somewhere between the folds of the spectral draperies, and further enhanced the spook-like appearance of the blackamoor. He carried a deep bowl fashioned of chased copper, which he placed upon the table in front of the old woman, immediately behind the crystal globe and the small metal box. The seer then opened the box, took out a pinch of something brown and powdery, and holding it between finger and thumb, she said solemnly:

"From out the heart of France rises the incense of faith, of hope, and of love!" and she dropped the powder into the bowl. "May it prove acceptable to him who is her chosen Lord!"

A bluish flame shot up from out the depth of the vessel, shed for the space of a second or two its ghostly light upon

the gaunt features of the old hag, the squat and grinning face of the negro, and toyed with the will-o'-the-wisp-like fitfulness of the surrounding gloom. A sweet-scented smoke rose upwards to the ceiling. Then the flame died down again, making the crimson darkness around appear by contrast more lurid and more mysterious than before.

Robespierre had not moved. His boundless vanity, his insatiable ambition, blinded him to the effrontery, the ridicule of this mysticism. He accepted the tangible incense, took a deep breath, as if to fill his entire being with its heady fumes, just as he was always ready to accept the fulsome adulation of his devotees and of his sycophants.

The old charlatan then repeated her incantations. Once more she took powder from the box, threw some of it into the vessel, and spoke in a sepulchral voice:

"From out of the heart of those who worship thee rises the incense of their praise!"

A delicate white flame rose immediately out of the vessel. It shed a momentary, unearthly brightness around, then as speedily vanished again. And for the third time the witch spoke the mystic words:

"From out the heart of an entire nation rises the incense of perfect joy in thy triumph over thine enemies!"

This time, however, the magic powder did not act quite so rapidly as it had done on the two previous occasions. For a few seconds the vessel remained dark and unresponsive; nothing came to dispel the surrounding gloom. Even the light of the oil lamp overhead appeared suddenly to grow dim. At any rate, so it seemed to the autocrat who, with nerves on edge, sat upon his throne-like seat, his bony

hands, so like the talons of a bird of prey, clutching the arms of his chair, his narrow eyes fixed upon the sybil, who in her turn was gazing on the metal vessal as if she would extort some cabalistic mystery from its depth.

All at once a bright red flame shot out of the bowl. Everything in the room became suffused with a crimson glow. The old witch bending over her cauldron looked as if she were smeared with blood, her eyes appeared bloodshot, her long hooked nose cast a huge black shadow over her mouth, distorting the face into a hideous, cadaverous grin. From her throat issued strange sounds like those of an animal in the throes of pain.

"Red! Red!" she lamented, and gradually as the flame subsided and finally flickered out altogether, her words became more distinct. She raised the crystal globe and gazed fixedly into it. "Always red," she went on slowly. "Thrice yesterday did I cas the spell in the name of Our Chosen...thrice did the spirits cloak their identity in a blood-red flame...red...always red...not only blood...but danger...danger of death through that which is red..."

Robespierre had risen from his seat, his thin lips were murmuring hasty imprecations. The kneeling figurants looked scared, and strange wailing sounds came from their mouths. The young blackamoor alone looked self-possessed. He stood by, evidently enjoying the scene, his white teeth gleaming in a huge, board grin.

"A truce on riddles, Mother!" Robespierre exclaimed at last impatiently, and descended hastily from the dais. He approached the old necromancer, seized her by the arm, thrust his head in front of hers in an endeavour to see

something which apparently was revealed to her in the crystal globe. "What is it you see in there?" he queried harshly.

But she pushed him aside, gazed with rapt intentness into the globe.

"Red!" she murmured. "Scarlet...aye, scarlet! And now it takes shape...Scarlet...and it obscures the Chosen One...the shape becomes more clear...the Chosen One appears more dim..."

Then she gave a piercing shriek.

"Beware!...beware!...that which is Scarlet is shaped like a flower...five petals, I see them distinctly...and the Chosen One I see no more..."

"Malediction!" the man exclaimed. "What foolery is this?"

"No foolery," the old charlatan resumed in a dull monotone. "Thou didst consult the oracle, oh thou, who art the Chosen of the people of France! and the oracle has spoken. Beware of a scarlet flower! From that which is scarlet comes danger of death for thee!"

Wherat Robespierre tried to laugh.

"Some one has filled thy head, Mother," he said in a voice which he vainly tried to steady, "with tales of the mysterious Englishman who goes by the name of the Scarlet Pimpernel—"

"Thy mortal enemy, O Messenger of the Most High!" the old blasphemer broke in solemnly. "In far-off fog-bound England he hath sworn thy death. Beware—"

"If that is the only danger which threatens me—" the other began, striving to speak carelessly.

"The only one, and the greatest one," the hag went on insistently. "Despise it not because it seems small and remote."

"I do not despise it; neither do I magnify it. A gnat is a nuisance, but not a danger."

"A gnat may wield a poisoned dart. The spirits have spoken. Heed their warning, O Chosen of the People! Destroy the Englishman ere he destroy thee!"

"Pardi!" Robespierre retorted, and despite the stuffiness of the room he gave a shiver as if he felt cold. "Since thou dost commune with the spirits, find out from them how I can accomplish that."

The woman once more raised the crystal globe to the level of her breast. With her elbows stretched out and her draperies falling straight all around her, she gazed into it for a while in silence. Then she began to murmur.

"I see the Scarlet Flower quite plainly...a small Scarlet Flower...And I see the great Light which is like an aureole, the Light of the Chosen One. It is of dazzling brightness—but over the Scarlet Flower casts a Stygian shadow."

"Ask them," Robespierre broke in peremptorily, "ask thy spirits how best I can overcome mine enemy."

"I see something," the witch went on in an even monotone, still gazing into the crystal globe "white and rose and tender...is it a woman...?"

"A woman?"

"She is tall, and she is beautiful...a stranger in the land...with eyes dark as the night and tresses black as the raven's wing...Yes, it is a woman...She stands between the Light and that blood-red flower. She takes the flower in her

hand...she fondles it, raises it to her lips...Ah!" and the old seer gave a loud cry of triumph. "She tosses it mangled and bleeding into the consuming Light...And now it lies faded, torn, crushed, and the Light grows in radiance and in brilliancy, and there is none now to dim its pristine glory—"

"But the woman? Who is she?" the man broke in impatiently. "What is her name?"

"The spirits speak no names," the seer replied. "Any woman would gladly be thy handmaid, O Elect of France! The spirits have spoken," she concluded solemnly. "Salvation will come to thee by the hand of a woman."

"And mine enemy?" he insisted. "Which of us two is in danger of death now—now that I am warned—which of us two?—mine English enemy, or I?"

Nothing loth, the old hag was ready to continue her sortilege. Robespierre hung breathless upon her lips. His whole personality seemed transformed. He appeared eager, fearful, credulous—a different man to the cold, calculating despot who sent thousands to their death with his measured oratory, the mere power of his presence. Indeed, history has sought in vain for the probably motive which drove this cynical tyrant into consulting this pitiable charlatan. That Catherine Théot had certain psychic powers has never been gainsaid, and since the philosophers of the eighteenth century had undermined the religious superstitions of the Middle Ages, it was only to be expected that in the great upheaval of this awful Revolution, men and women should turn to the mystic and the supernatural as to a solace and respite from the fathomless misery of their daily lives.

In this world of ours, the more stupendous the events, the more abysmal the catastrophes, the more do men realize their own impotence and the more eagerly do they look for the Hidden Hand that is powerful enough to bring about such events and to hurl upon them such devastating cataclysms. Indeed, never since the dawn of history had so many theosophies, demonologies, occult arts, spiritualism, exorcism of all sorts, flourished as they did now: the Theists, the Rosicrucians, the Illuminat, Swedenborg, the Count of Saint Germain, Weishaupt, and scores of others, avowed charlatans or earnest believers, had their neophytes, their devotees, and their cults.

Catherine Théot was one of many: for the nonce, one of the most noteworthy in Paris. She believed herself to be endowed with the gift of prophecy, and her fetish was Robespierre. In this at least she was genuine. She believed him now to be a new Messiah, the Elect of God. Nay! she loudly proclaimed him as such, and one of her earliest neophytes, an ex-Carthusian monk named Gerle, who sat in the Convention next to the great man, had whispered in the latter's ear the insidious flattery which had gradually led his footsteps to the witch's lair.

Whether his own vanity—which was without limit and probably without parallel—caused him to believe in his own heaven-sent mission, or whether he only desire to strengthen his own popularity by endowing it with supernatural prestige, is a matter of conjecture. Certain it is that he did lend himself to Catherine Théot's cabalistic practices and that he allowed himself to be flattered and worshipped by the numerous nepohytes who flocked to this

new temple of magic, either from mystical fevour or merely to serve their own ends by fawning on the most dreaded man in France.

2.

Catherine Théot had remained rigidly still, in rapt contemplation. It seemed as if she pondered over the Chosen One's last peremptory demand.

"Which of us two," he had queried, in a dry, hard voice, "is in danger of death now—now that I am warned—mine English enemy, or I?"

The next moment, as if moved by inspiration, she took another pinch of powder out of the metal box. The nigger's bright black eyes followed her every movement, as did the dictator's half-contemptuous gaze. The girls had begun to intone a monotonous chant. As the seer dropped the powder into the metal bowl, a highly scented smoke shot upwards and the interior of the vessel was suffused with a golden glow. The smoke rose in spirals. Its fumes spread through the airless room, rendering the atmosphere insufferably heavy.

The dictator of France felt a strange exultation running through him, as with deep breaths he inhaled the potent fumes. It seemed to him as if his body had suddenly become etherealized, as if he were in truth the Chosen of the Most High as well as the idol of France. Thus disembodied, he felt in himself boundless strength! the power to rise triumphant over all his enemies, whoever they may be. There was a mighty buzzing in his ears like the reverberation of thousands of trumpets and drums ringing and beating in unison to his exaltation and to his might. His

eyes appeared to see the whole of the people of France, clad in white robes, with ropes round their necks, and bowing as slaves to the ground before him. He was riding on a cloud. His throne was of gold. In his hand he had a sceptre of flame, and beneath his feet lay, crushed and mangled, a huge scarlet flower. The sybil's voice reached his ears as if through a surpernal trumpet:

"Thus lie for ever crushed at the feet of the Chosen One, those who have dared to defy his power!"

Greater and greater became his exultation. He felt himself uplifted high, high above the clouds, until he could see the world as a mere crystal ball at his feet. His head had touched the portals of heaven; his eyes gazed upon his own majesty, which was second only to that of God. An eternity went by. He was immortal.

Then suddenly, through all the mystic music, the clarion sounds and songs of praise, there came a sound, so strange and yet so human, that the almighty dictator's wandering spirit was in an instant hurled back to earth, brought down with a mighty jerk which left him giddy, sick, with throat dry and burning eyes. He could not stand on his feet, indeed would have fallen but that the negro had hastily pulled a chair forward, into which he sank, swooning with unaccountable horror.

And yet that sound had been harmless enough: just a peal of laughter, merry and inane—nothing more. It came faintly echoing form beyond the heavy portière. Yet it had unnerved the most ruthless despot in France. He looked about him, scared and mystified. Nothing had been changed since he had gone wandering into Elysian fields. He was still

in a stuffy, curtained room; there was the dais on which he had sat; the two women still chanted their weird lament; and there was the old necromancer in her shapeless, colourless robe, coolly setting down the crystal globe upon its carved stand. There was the blackamoor, grinning and mischievous, the metal vessel, the oil lamp, the threadbare carpet. What of all this had been a dream? The clouds and the trumpets, or that peal of human laughter with the quaint, inane catch in it? No one looked scared: the girls chanted, the old hag mumbled vague directions to her black attendant, who tried to look solemn, since he was paid to keep his impish mirth in check.

"What was that?" Robespierre murmured at last.

The old woman looked up.

"What was what, O Chosen One?" she asked.

"I heard a sound—" he mumbled. "A laugh...Is anyone else in the room?"

She shrugged her shoulders.

"People are waiting in the antechamber," she replied carelessly, "until it is the pleasure of the Chosen One to go. As a rule they wait patiently, and in silence. But one of them may have laughed." Then, as he made no further comment but still stood there silent, as if irresolute, she queried with a great show of deference: "What is thy next pleasure, O thou who art beloved of the people of France?"

"Nothing...nothing!" he murmured. "I'll go now."

She turned straight to him and made him elaborate obeisance, waving her arms about her. The two girls struck the ground with their foreheads. The Chosen One, in his

innermost heart vaguely conscious of ridicule, frowned impatiently.

"Do not," he said peremptorily, "let anyone know that I have been here."

"Only those who idolize thee—" she began.

"I know—I know," he broke in more gently, for the fulsome adulation soothed his exacerbated nerves. "But I have many enemies...and thou too art watched with malevolent eyes...Let not our enemies make capital of our intercourse."

"I swear to thee, O Mighty Lord, that thy servant obeys thy behests in all things."

"That is well," he retorted drily. "But thy adepts are wont to talk too much. I'll not have my name bandied about for the glorification of thy necromancy."

"Thy name is sacred to thy servants," she insisted with ponderous solemnity. "As sacred as is thy person. Thous art the regenerator of the true faith, the Elect of the First Cause, the high priest of a new religion. We are but thy servants, thy handmaids, thy worshippers."

All this charlatanism was precious incense to the limitless vanity of the despot. His impatience vanished, as did his momentary terror. He became kind, urbane, condescending. At the last, the old hag almost prostrated herself before him, and clasping her wrinkled hands together, she said in tones of reverential entreaty:

"In the name of thyself, of France, of the entire world, I adjure thee to lend ear to what the spirits have revealed this day. Beware the danger that comes to thee from the scarlet flower. Set thy almighty mind to compass its destruction. Do

not disdain a woman's help, since the spirits have proclaimed that through a woman thou shalt be saved. Remember! Remember!" she adjured him with ever-growing earnestness. "Once before, the world was saved through a woman. A woman crushed the serpent beneath her foot. Let a woman now crush that scarlet flower beneath hers. Remember!"

She actually kissed his feet; and he, blinded by self-conceit to the folly of this fetishism and the redicule of his own acceptance of it, raised his hand above her head as if in the act of pronouncing a benediction.

Then without another word he turned to go. The young negro brought him his hat and cloak. The latter he wrapped closely round his shoulders, his hat he pulled down well over his eyes. Thus muffled and, he hoped, unrecognizable, he passed with a firm tread out of the room.

3.

For awhile the old witch waited, strainer her ears to catch the last sound of those retreating footsteps; then, with a curt word and an impatient clapping of her hands, she dismissed her attendants, the negro as well as her neophytes. These young women at her word lost quickly enough their air of rapt mysticism, became very human indeed, stretched out their limbs, yawned lustily, and with none too graceful movements uncurled themselves and struggled to their feet. Chattering and laughing like so many magpies let out of a cage, they soon disappeared through the door in the rear.

Again the old woman waited silent and motionless until that merry sound too gradually subsided. Then she went

across the room to the dais, and drew aside the curtain which hung behind it.

"Citizen Chauvelin!" she called peremptorily.

A small figure of a man stepped out from the gloom. He was dressed in black, his hair, of a nondescript blonde shade and his crumpled linen alone told light in the general sombreness of his appearance.

"Well?" he retorted drily.

"Are you satisfied?" the old woman went on with eager impatience. "You heard what I said?"

"Yes, I heard," he replied. "Think you he will act on it?"

"I am certain of it."

"But why not have named Theresia Cabarrus? Then, at least, I would have been sure—"

"He might have recoiled at an actual name," the woman replied, "suspected me of connivance. The Chosen of the people of France is shrewd as well as distrustful. And I have my reputation to consider. But, remember what I said: 'tall, dark, beautiful, a stranger in this land!' So, if indeed you require the help of the Spaniard—"

"Indeed I do!" he rejoined earnestly. And, as if speaking to his own inward self, "Theresia Cabarrus is the only woman I know who can really help me."

"But you cannot force her consent, citizen Chauvelin," the sybil insisted.

The eyes of citizen Chauvelin lit up suddenly with a flash of that old fire of long ago, when he was powerful enough to compel the consent or the co-operation of any man, woman or child on whom he had deigned to cast an appraising glance. But the flash was only momentary. The next second

he had once more resumed his unobtrusive, even humbled, attitude.

"My friends, who are few," he said, with a quick sigh of impatience; "and mine enemies, who are without number, will readily share your conviction, Mother, that citizen Chauvelin can compel no one to do his bidding these days. Least of all the affianced wife of powerful Tallien."

"Well, then," the sybil argued, "how think you that—"

"I only hope, Mother," Chauvelin broke in suavely, "that after your séance to-day, citizen Robespierre himself will see to it that Theresia Cabarrus gives me the help I need."

Catherine Théot shrugged her shoulders.

"Oh!" she said drily, "the Cabarrus knows no law save that of her caprice. And as Tallien's fiancée she is almost immune."

"Almost, but not quite! Tallien is powerful, but so was Danton."

"But Tallien is prudent, which Danton was not."

"Tallien is also a coward; and easily led like a lamb, with a halter. He came back from Bordeaux tied to the apron-strings of the fair Spaniard. He should have spread fire and terror in the region; but at her bidding he dispensed justice and even mercy instead. A little more airing of his moderate views, a few more acts of unpatriotic clemeney, and powerful Tallien himself may become 'suspect.'"

"And you think that, when he is," the old woman rejoined with grim sarcasm, "you will hold his fair betrothed in the hollow of your hand?"

"Certainly!" he assented, and with an acid smile fell to contemplating his thin, talon-like palms. "Since Robespierre,

counselled by Mother Théot, will himself have placed her there."

Whereupon Catherine Théot ceased to argue, since the other appeared so sure of himself. Once more she shrugged her shoulders.

"Well, then, if you are satisfied..." she said.

"I am. Quite," he replied, and at once plunged his hand in the breast-pocket of his coat. He had caught the look of avarice and of greed which had glittered in the old hag's eyes. From his pocket he drew a bundle of notes, for which Catherine immediately stretched out a grasping hand. But before giving her the money, he added a stern warning.

"Silence, remember! And, above all, discretion!"

"You may rely on me, citizen," the sybil riposted quietly. "I am not likely to blab."

He did not place the notes in her hand, but threw them down on the table with a gesture of contempt, without deigning to count. But Catherine Théot cared nothing for his contempt. She coolly picked up the notes and hid them in the folds of her voluminous draperies. Then as Chauvelin, without another word, had turned unceremoniously to go, she placed a bony hand upon his arm.

"And I can rely on you, citizen," she insisted firmly, "that when the Scarlet Pimpernel is duly captured..."

"There will be ten thousand livres for you," he broke in impatiently, "if my scheme with Theresia Cabarrus is successful. I never go back on my word."

"And I'll not go back on mine," she concluded drily. "We are dependent on one another, citizen Chauvelin. You want to capture the English spy, and I want ten thousand livres,

so that I may retire from active life and quietly cultivate a plot of cabbages somewhere in the sunshine. So you may leave the matter to me, my friend. I'll not allow the great Robespierre to rest till he has compelled Theresia Cabarrus to do your bidding. Then you may use her as you think best. That gang of English spies must be found, and crushed. We cannot have the Chosen of the Most High threatened by such vermin. Ten thousand livres, you say?" the sybil went on, and once again, as in the presence of the dictator, a mystic exultation appeared to possess her soul. Gone was the glitter of avarice from her eyes; her wizened face seem transfigured, her shrunken form to gain in stature. "Nay! I would serve you on my knees and accord you worship, if you avert the scarlet danger that hovers over the head of the Beloved of France!"

But Chauvelin was obviously in no mood to listen to the old hag's jeremiads, and while with arms uplifted she once more worked herself up to a hysterical burst of enthusiasm for the bloodthirsty monster whom she worshipped, he shook himself free from her grasp and finally slipped out of the room, without further wasting his breath.

Chapter III—The Fellowship of Grief

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1.

In the antechamber of Catherine Théot's abode of mysteries some two hours later, half a dozen persons were sitting. The room was long, narrow and bare, its walls dank and colourless, and save for the rough wooden benches on which these person sat, was void of any furniture. The benches were ranged against the walls; the one window at the end was shuttered as to exclude all daylight, and from the ceiling there hung a broken-down wrought-iron chandelier, wherein a couple of lighted tallow candles were set, the smoke from which rose in irregular spirals upwards to the low and blackened ceiling.

These persons who sat or sprawled upon the benches did not speak to one another. They appeared to be waiting. One or two of them were seemingly asleep; others, from time to time, would rouse themselves from their apathy, look with dim, inquiring eyes in the direction of a heavy portière. When this subsided again all those in the bare waiting-room resumed their patient, lethargic attitude, and a silence—weird and absolute—reigned once more over them all. Now and then somebody would sigh, and at one time one of the sleepers snored.

Far away a church clock struck six.

2.

A few minutes later, the portière was lifted, and a girl came into the room. She held a shawl, very much the worse for wear, tightly wrapped around her meagre shoulders, and

from beneath her rough wollen skirt her small feet appeared clad in well-worn shoes and darned worsted stockings. Her hair, which was fair and soft, was partially hidden under a white muslin cap, and as she walked with a brisk step across the room, she looked neither to right nor left, appeared to move as in a dream. And her large grey eyes were brimming over with tears.

Neither her rapid passage across the room nor her exit through a door immediately opposite the window created the slightest stir amongst those who were waiting. Only one of the men, a huge ungainly giant, whose long limbs appeared to stretch half-across the bare wooden floor, looked up lazily as she passed.

After the girl had gone, silence once more fell on the small assembly. Not a sound came from behind the portière; but from beyond the other door the faint patter of the girl's feet could be heard gradually fading away as she went slowly down the stone stairs.

A few more minutes went by, then the door behind the portière was opened and a cadaverous voice spoke the word, "Enter!"

There was a faint stir among those who waited. A woman rose from her seat, said dully: "My turn, I think?" and, gliding across the room like some bodiless spectre, she presently vanished behind the portière.

"Are you going to the Fraternal Supper to-night, citizen Langlois?" the giant said, after the woman had gone. His tone was rasping and harsh and his voice came with a wheeze and an obviously painful effort from his broad, doubled-up chest.

"Not I!" Langlois replied. "I must speak with Mother Théot. My wife made me promise. She is too ill to come herself, and the poor unfortunate believes in the Théot's incantations."

"Come out and get some fresh air, then," the other rejoined. "It is stifling in here!"

It was indeed stuffy in the dark, smoke-laden room. The man put his bony hand up to his chest, as if to quell a spasm of pain. A horrible, rasping cough shook his big body and brought a sweat to his brow. Langlois, a wizened little figure of a man, who looked himself as if he had one foot in the grave, waited patiently until the spasm was over, then, with the indifference peculiar to these turbulent times, he said lightly:

"I would just as soon sit here as wear out shoe-leather on the cobblestones of this God-forsaken hole. And I don't want to miss my turn with mother Théot."

"You'll have another four hours mayhap to wait in this filthy atmosphere."

"What an aristo you are, citizen Rateau!" the other retorted drily. "Always talking about the atmosphere!"

"So would you, if you had only one lung wherewith to inhale this filth," growled the giant through a wheeze.

"Then don't wait for me, my friend," Langlois concluded with a careless shrug of his narrow shoulders. "And, if you don't mind missing your turn..."

"I do not," was Rateau's curt reply. "I would as soon be last as not. But I'll come back presently. I am the third from now. If I'm not back you can have my turn, and I'll follow you in. But I can't—"

His next words were smothered in a terrible fit of coughing, as he struggled to his feet. Langlois swore at him for making such a noise, and the women, roused from their somnolence, sigh with impatience or resignation. But all those who remained seated on the benches watched with a kind of dull curiosity the ungainly figure of the asthmatic giant as he made his way across the room and anon went out through the door.

His heavy footsteps were heard descending the stone stairs with a shuffling sound, and the clatter of his wooden shoes. The women once more settled themselves against the dank walls, with feet stretched out before them and arms folded over their breasts, and in that highly uncomfortable position prepared once more to go to sleep.

Langlois buried his hands in the pockets of his breeches, spat contentedly upon the floor, and continued to wait.

3.

In the meanwhile, the girl who, with tear-filled eyes, had come out of the inner mysterious room in Mother Théot's apartments, had, after a slow descent down the interminable stone stairs, at last reached the open air.

The Rue de la Planchette is only a street in name, for the houses in it are few and far between. One side of it is taken up for the major portion of its length by the dry moat which at this point forms the boundary of the Arsenal and of the military ground around the Bastille. The house wherein lodged Mother Théot is one of a small group situated behind the Bastille, the grim ruins of which can be distinctly seen from the upper windows. Immediately facing those houses is the Porte St. Antoine, through which the wayfarer in this

remote quarter of Paris has to pass in order to reach the more populous parts of the city. This is just a lonely and squalid backwater, broken up by undeveloped land and timber yards. One end of the street abuts on the river, the other becomes merged in the equally remote suburb of Popincourt.

But, for the girl who had just come out of the heavy, fetid atmosphere of Mother Théot's lodgings, the air which reached her nostrils as she came out of the wicket-gate, was positive manna to her lungs. She stood for awhile quite still, drinking in the balmy spring air, almost dizzy with the sensation of purity and of freedom which came to her from over the vast stretch of open ground occupied by the Arsenal. For a minute or two she stood there, then walked deliberately in the direction of the Porte St. Antoine.

She was very tired, for she had come to the Rue de la Planchette on foot all the way from the small apartment in the St. Germain quarter, where she lodged with her mother and sister and a young brother; she had become weary and jaded by sitting for hours on a hard wooden bench, waiting her turn to speak with Mother Théot, and then standing for what seemed an eternity of time in the presence of the soothsayer, who had further harassed her nerves by weird prophecies and mystic incantations.

But for the nonce weariness was forgotten. Régine de Serval was going to meet the man she loved, at a trysting-place which they had marked as their own: the porch of the church of Petit St. Antoine, a secluded spot where neither prying eyes could see them nor ears listen to what they had to say. A spot which to poor little Régine was the very

threshold of Paradise, for here she had Bertrand all to herself, undisturbed by the prattle of Joséphine or Jacques or the querulous complaints of maman, cooped up in that miserable apartment in the old St. Germain quarter of the city.

So she walked briskly and without hesitation. Bertrand had agreed to meet her at five o'clock. It was now close on half-past six. It was still daylight, and a brilliant April sunset tinged the cupola of Ste. Marie with gold and drew long fantastic shadows across the wide Rue St. Antoine.

Régine had crossed the Rue des Balais, and the church porch of Petit St. Antoine was bust a few paces farther on, when she became conscious of heavy, dragging footsteps some little way behind her. Immediately afterwards, the distressing sound of a racking cough reached her ears, followed by heartrending groans as of a human creature in grievous bodily pain. The girl, not in the least frightened, instinctively turned to look, and was moved to pity on seeing a man leaning against the wall of a house, in a state bordering on collapse, his hands convulsively grasping his chest, which appeared literally torn by a violent fit of coughing. Forgetting her own troubles, as well as the joy which awaited her so close at hand, Régine unhesitatingly recrossed the road, approached the sufferer, and in a gentle voice asked him if she could be of any assistance to him in his distress.

"A little water," he gasped, "for mercy's sake!"

Just for a second or two she looked about her, doubtful as to what to do, hoping perhaps to catch sight of Bertrand, if he had not given up all hope of meeting her. The next, she

had stepped boldly through the wicket-gate of the nearest porte-cochère, and finding her way to the lodge of the concierge, she asked for a drop of water for a passer-by who was in pain. A jug of water was at once handed to her by a sympathetic concierge, and with it she went back to complete her simple act of mercy.

For a moment she was puzzled, not seeing the poor vagabond there, where she had left him half-swooning against the wall. But soon she spied him, in the very act of turning under the little church porch of Petit St. Antoine, the hallowed spot of her frequent meetings with Bertrand.

4.

He seemed to have crawled there for shelter, and there he collapsed upon the wooden bench, in the most remote angle of the porch. Of Bertrand there was not a sign.

Régine was soon by the side of the unfortunate. She held up the jug of water to his quaking lips, and he drank eagerly. After that he felt better, muttered vague words of thanks. But he seemed so weak, despite his stature, which appeared immense in this narrow enclosure, that she did not like to leave him. She sat down beside him, suddenly conscious of fatigue. He seemed harmless enough, and after awhile began to tell her of his trouble. This awful asthma, which he had contracted in the campaign against the English in Holland, where he and his comrades had to march in snow and ice, often shoeless and with nothing but bass mats around their shoulders. He had but lately been discharged out of the army as totally unfit, and he had no money wherewith to pay a doctor, he would no doubt have been dead by now but that a comrade had spoken to him of

Mother Théot, a marvellous sorceress, who knew the art of drugs and simples, and could cure all ailments of the body by the mere laying on of hands.

"Ah, yes," the girl sighed involuntarily, "of the body!"

Through the very act of sitting still, a deadly lassitude had crept into her limbs. She was thankful not to move, to say little, and to listen with half an ear to the vagabond's jeremiads. Anyhow, she was sure that Bertrand would no longer be waiting. He was ever impatient if he thought that she failed him in anything, and it was she who had appointed five o'clock for their meeting. Even now the church clock way above the porch was striking half-past six. And the asthmatic giant went glibly on. He had partially recovered his breath.

"Aye!" he was saying, in response to her lament, "and of the mind, too. I had a comrade whose sweetheart was false to him while he was fighting for his country. Mother Théot gave him a potion which he administered to the faithless one, and she returned to him as full of ardour as ever before."

"I have no faith in potions," the girl said, and shook her head sadly the while tears once more gathered in her eyes.

"No more have I," the giant assented carelessly. "But if my sweetheart was false to me I know what I would do."

This he said in so droll a fashion, and the whole idea of this ugly, ungainly creature having a sweetheart was so comical, that despite her will, the ghost of a smile crept round the young girl's sensitive mouth.

"What would you do, citizen?" she queried gently.